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# Aviation--A Tale Told 2000 Years Ago

Translated by JOHN G. KERR

Ovid's version of the legendary flight on wings, from their Cretan prison, of the skillful mechanic Dædalus and his ill-fated boy Icarus, is given here in easy form.

## THE MOTIF OF THE POEM

THE years roll on. To Dædalus the pain  
Of exile and the hungering in vain  
For natural land—cut off by Cretan sea—  
Compel his mind to rare activity.  
"If circling ocean and the frowning hills  
Oppose our going, then our dauntless wills,"  
He said, "must find an open route in air.  
Let Minos all possess, his power extends not there."

\* \* \*

## THE CHORUS HERE INTERPOSES:

Dædalus, the cunning craftsman,  
Planning to regain his freedom,  
Planning to re-visit Hellas,  
Turned his thoughts to strange devices,  
Boldly trying innovations.  
No escape by land or water  
From the labyrinth of Minos,  
He must climb the Empyrean,  
Soar aloft on powerful pinions.  
And to Icarus, all eager  
When he learned his father's project,  
Came a glow of pride and glory  
To be sharing this adventure.  
Wings were fashioned by the craftsman,  
Wings on which to cleave the heavens,  
By the wise and clever artist.  
First were gathered heaps of plumage,  
Plumage of the hawk and eagle,  
Plumage of the owl and raven,  
Sorted out in graded sizes,  
And arranged to form a structure:  
Long and short so aptly fitted  
As to give a planar surface  
Like the reeds that make a Pan-pipe.  
Then, with flaxen threads, the feathers  
Were entwined and bound together;  
Melted wax confirmed the binding.  
Thus composed the four confections  
Gentle curvings, stayed with lint strings,  
Made with wings complete and powerful,  
Fit for daring Aviators.

\* \* \*

## FATHER AND SON

Beside his sire the ardent pupil paced,  
Nor knew how dread the danger to be faced.  
With smiling eyes, his hands the feathers press  
Which wandering winds had ruffled in caress.  
Or, now again, with thumb the wax indents:  
And thus in play his father's wondrous work prevents,  
At length the hand of Dædalus is stayed,  
His work complete, nor seriously delayed.  
Himself, their builder, on twin wings would dare;  
He moves his arms with force and balances in air.  
He Icarus instructs: "My son be wise;  
A middle course of flight I do advise;  
If lower route you take, the salt sea-spray,  
If higher, then the burning sun, may check your way.  
Between the two proceed—nor low, nor high.

For safety this remember, as you fly,  
Boötes shun: not with Orion's sword your guide,  
On me, your leader, let brave hope abide."  
His sire, of flying, vital knowledge brings,  
And to the unaccustomed shoulders fixes wings.  
But as he worked and spoke down crept the tears,  
His trembling hands betrayed the father's fears.  
One kiss—the last; then raised on wings in air,  
He leads, yet fears how may his follower fare.  
And, like a bird who from the lofty nest  
Would call her offspring to a flying test,  
Exhorts his son to confidence and joy.  
His own wings move: his eyes glance back upon his boy.

\* \* \*

## THE CHORUS TAKES UP THE TALE:

Thus the first of aviators,  
Dædalus, the cunning craftsman,  
And young Icarus, his offspring,  
Rising from their Cretan prison,  
Winged their way above the city,  
Winged their way o'er brooks and meadows,  
Over tilled lands, over mountains,  
Heading northward to the Ægean.  
Greatly wondered then the angler,  
When to him from out the trout stream  
Came the image from above him—  
"Men on wings!"—in air advancing.  
And the shepherd on the hillside,  
Leaning on his staff, was startled.  
Startled also was the ploughman,  
When relinquishing the plough-tail  
He espied this monstrous marvel—  
Men in air, their way pursuing—  
"Surely these are Gods," he shouted.

\* \* \*

## CATASTROPHE

They flew due North till Paros isle appeared.  
From Delos East to Juno's Samos steered.  
Lebynthos now was seen upon the right  
With Calymne, the honey-land, in sight.  
The boy, emboldened, here rash courage takes—  
He madly upward flies, his guide forsakes.  
The unchecked Sun the scented wax subdues;  
The loosened bonds, to play their part, refuse.  
No longer winged, in vain his shoulders bend,  
The air unmoved can no reaction lend.  
Alas! the father cannot Icarus save  
Whose cries are drowned beneath Icarian wave.

\* \* \*

## LAMENT

"Oh! Icarus, my son"—the father cried.  
"Where hast thou gone?" No Icarus replied.  
But far beneath, the sport of wind and wave,  
The floating feathers mournful answer gave.  
"Accurst the wit which planned the wild emprise,  
Accurst the skill which raised us to the skies!"  
The dead he found upon an island shore,  
The name of Icaros it bears, for evermore.